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ABSTRACT

The Long Island Team is a collaborative system of K-12 students and teachers, university students and faculty, and community members who have been linked by telecommunications and in-person sessions. Since 1993 the group has culminated their work together at an annual sharing event. This paper provides the history of the learning community, a list of past and present major contributors, details about several of the group's "live" face-to-face sessions, and some examples of presentations given at past sharing events. In a more general sense, the paper discusses the synergy and compatibility that are forged from 24-hour-a-day access and from working together on meaningful projects. (Author/BEW)

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Building a Learning Community: Telecommunications, Collaborations, and Sharing on Long Island

Paper presented at the NECC '95, the Annual National Educational Computing Conference (16th, Baltimore, MD, June 17-19, 1995.

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Building a Learning Community: Telecommunications, Collaborations, and Sharing on Long Island

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Abstract

The Long Island Team is a collaborative system comprised of K–12 teachers and students, university faculty, undergraduate, and graduate students, and community members. All are connected electronically and meet in person as they build our "Long Island Learning Community." People and resources are potentially within reach 24 hours a day, continually. Synergy arises as connections are formed while participants collaborate on meaningful work.

Introduction

The Long Island Team is a "living" learning community, a collaboration of children, teachers, and community resources who for two years have been linked by telecommunications and in–person sessions and who have culminated their work together at a sharing event each June. It personifies such calls for collaborations as in *A New Compact for Learning*, a New York State initiative stressing decision making among partners – parents, teachers, administrators, higher education, business/industry, and others in the community. The Long Island Team falls within the words of the *Compact* and other reports but differs from many activities in the force of its passion and commitment to define and create a shared vision of a learning community. Greatly inspired to use technologies when needed or effective, we strive to work and live synergistically and give to community.

We focus on broad educational systems that see beyond themselves and into the future. We see teaching and learning without artificial or arbitrary boundaries, defined collaboratively by players within a fluid system who create a shared vision of the future and then move toward that future *together*. We build especially upon Peter Senge's (1990) learning organizations and shared vision, Howard Gardner's (1991; 1993) work on teaching and learning, and Lewis Perelman's (1992) and Roy Pea's (1992) reconceptualization of new learning systems using technology.

Our History

In 1991, we met with several New York educators to clarify what we most value for the future in education and to envision "break the mold" schools we could create across New York state. We submitted a proposal to President Bush's America 2000 call. Although not funded by America 2000, we linked ourselves to the New York educators, forming New School Vision, Inc. a not–for–profit–organization, and committed ourselves to act upon what we had dreamed and ultimately desired. Our Long Island collaborative group was then formed, creating our vision of a learning community – ours (as a first step) locally. We became the Long Island Team, builders of a learning community on Long Island. Most significantly, we grew from a deep understanding of what we value and what we have passion for. Wanting to begin by defining ourselves within our community, we selected fourth grade as our initial focus because fourth graders study community.

A Long Island Learning Community

Our learning organization is anchored in action. We *use* technologies for purpose rather than just study how to use them. With support and encouragement from numerous sources, teacher training for technology is woven into purposeful action and threaded through disciplines as our teachers choose to see their own learning as part of a greater whole. We go beyond the mold that has some teachers see "learning how to word process," for example, as something to be studied in a "formal teacher workshop or class on word processing." We much prefer computers and modems available within the classroom and at home with teachers, as learners, working on projects, and having electronic access to their district technology facilitator, to one another, and to others in our community. In concert with this are opportunities for hands–on workshops within and outside districts to support whatever is being done. Synergy arises among teachers and students collaborating on projects that naturally result in college students and faculty, people in business and industry, parents, neighbors, and so on, informally contributing to the class or contributing outside of the school day. They, too, become ongoing support as well as learners and contributors.

In the Half Hollow Hills School District two teachers from two separate elementary schools participated during the first year of our work together. One had extensive experience using technologies while the other did not. Each was provided with two computers and modems; one for use in the classroom, the other at home. This offered them 24 hour ongoing contact and support and modelled the strategy set forth in the district's long range plan for technology. Because of the success of this first year, in the second year five teachers from five elementary schools in the district each received a computer and modem for their classrooms. This year 24, all of the fourth grade teachers in the district, are provided similar equipment.

To share with you the Long Island Team year for all participants, we present a map showing our presence on Long Island, and descriptions of 1) our Kick–Off event, 2) our activities throughout the year, and 3) our Sharing Event.

Who We Are

Spanning 100 miles of Long Island, 500 children and their teachers participated last year and more than 1,000 children and their teachers are committed to participate in the 1994–1995 school year.

Long Island Team Past and Present Major Contributors include:

Long Island University (C.W. Post Campus & Southampton Campus)

K–12 School Districts (including both private and public): Bay Shore, Bridgehampton, Comsewogue, East Islip, East Rockaway, East Williston, Half Hollow Hills, Hampton Day School, Huntington, Jericho, Kings Park, Lindenhurst, Massapequa, Mill Neck School for the Deaf, Mineola, Oceanside, Patchogue–Medford, Plainview– Old Bethpage, The Portledge School, Roslyn, Southampton, Three Village, The United Nations School in Queens, Valley Stream, and West Babylon.

Newsday

Cablevision

The Theodore Roosevelt Sanctuary
Ventana East Corporation
Voice of America
New School Vision, Inc.
The Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities
IBM
Lackmann Foods
Wholesale Tire
New York State's Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) –Suffolk County

Kick–Off

Face–to–face sessions such as a Kick–Off, seed and build activities for the year, connect people and resources, energize and motivate and, most importantly, permit the development of an on–going creation of "shared vision" amongst learners who establish context for our learning community in the coming year. Action and meaning are synergized from the start. Learners (be they teachers, students, community–resource members) are immediately central in a learning system seeing all people and resources within their reach. *They* must take charge of their learning and see beyond the walls of a 4th grade class, a school building, or school district. This process begins at the Kick–Off with activities such as the ones highlighted below from our August 1994 day together.

Telecommunications Hands–On Workshop

Every participant at the Kick–Off has the opportunity to learn to use the telecommunications system that opens the learning community to continual/forever access to one another. All leave confident that they can send and receive e–mail and participate on the forum. They meet and know people in the system who give them support and comfort.

A Model of Envisioning Community Resources (Live Birds of Prey)

This fall the Theodore Roosevelt Sanctuary showed live birds of prey and chatted with us about them. The director was active on the forum the preceding year asking and fielding questions and beginning to define for herself the role of constant communications, planning, and hands–on experiences with live animals. We model a place for "non" technology aspects of projects that seem most appropriate "live." However, we seek to enrich "live" experiences by deepening, extending, and expanding them when we are not face–to–face. Rather than see the nature sanctuary as a place to visit on a field trip *only* or to have the director visit one's school *only*, we began to explore how to collaborate on real environmental projects that jointly connect us at the personal level and sustain and enrich our efforts electronically.

A Model of Envisioning Business/Industry Resources (Newsday)

The Long Island newspaper, *Newsday*, provides the accounts and support for the telecommunications backbone of our organization and has people available via telecommunications and at our in–person sessions. In the 1994 Kick–Off, more opportunities for the future were explored as Newsday itself grows into today's information society. Again, we seek to model how to rethink our roles together. What is Newsday interested in? What are we? Where might we meet? Newsday has provided services. What do we provide to and with them?

Group Systems V, A Groupware Tool

Our afternoon was spent modelling our use of technology for purpose as we planned for the coming year. We used Group Systems V® (GSV) software, donated to us for the day by Ventana East Corporation. (GSV is a new version of what was TeamFocus®, a software product provided by IBM during the two preceding Kick–Offs.)

We did three online brainstorming sessions:

1. **Resources** – Exploring how *we* are resources and asking what other resources are around us
2. **Dreaming** – Letting go of the constraints of politics, enclosures, "can't be" mindsets, and dreaming about what we value and desire
3. **Specific Long Island Team Activities** – Planning for initial activities on the forum to kick off the year

A Model of a HyperCard Project From the Previous Sharing Event

A fourth grade teacher, active in the Long Island Team since its inception and knowledgeable and conversant in technology, demonstrated the interdisciplinary, multimedia project her class created. The HyperCard project, *Long Island Past to Present*, dealt with areas such as Native Americans, Famous People, Places of Interest, and Weather on Long Island. It included an original song written and performed by the students as well as scanned images of people and places of Long Island, links to video clips found on the Suffolk County Explorer (a videodisc produced and donated by Suffolk BOCES III), databases, and student reactions to and reflections on people and places studied and visited. The teacher talked about student research involved in the project, ongoing electronic communications with other teachers, students, and community resources, and creativity, motivation, critical thinking, and problem solving exhibited by the children throughout their work on the project. Also mentioned was the need for all to be actively involved throughout the year in order for Long Island Team to be maximally effective.

Following testimonials and conversation, participants at the Kick–Off left the day energized, excited, and eager to be creators and learners in the system throughout the year – and hopefully, forever.

Throughout the Year

Since we see a system with open access to unlimited people and resources 24 hours a day, we must model such a system

within our own community. Rather than have in person meeting times as the only contact, connections can be fluid and continual. Face–to–face time can then be used maximally for what cannot be done electronically. This view is open to a blending and new definition of how to use time, effort, energy, space, and resources as well as how to efficiently channel individual work and collaborations. Used most powerfully, synergy arises from people working interdependently on meaningful projects that **do** something. These need not fit into the traditional structure of a day. We look for continual building of people together throughout the year.

Telecommunications

Telecommunications is natural and ubiquitous in our learning community. It is defined by participants throughout the year in the broad forum topics of *Reflections, Activities, Resources, Dialogue, How Do I?, and Other*. Telecommunications is a first step in our building with other information technologies, too.

Face–to–Face Meetings, Workshops, Get–Togethers

The management team, open to all participants, meets once a month at various locations across Long Island. We make it easy for people to host and attend if they wish. Those who do not attend are urged to discuss issues for the management meetings electronically or in person with anyone who will be attending. Feedback is given on the electronic forum. Ultimately, we envision distance learning equipment (now available in several sites for us) connecting management sessions across the community. We hope to use interactive tools such as GSV as part of our planning, too.

Some districts hold meetings for their participating teachers on a regular basis. Some make these open to others in the project. The management team runs six sessions throughout the year. These are nurturing and informal, intimate in a way, and always include planning and team building as well as workshops. Whoever "knows," "gives" and "does." Workshop topics range from using various technology tools as part of the project (*e.g.*, telecommunications, word processing, databases, spreadsheet, desktop publishing, multimedia, computer graphics and presentation tools) to using various multimedia equipment such as those incorporating computers, CD–ROMs, laser discs, television, and video. Cablevision, for example, hosted a video workshop with their news and documentary producers to introduce Long Island Team participants to concepts and techniques for scripting, editing, and taping video projects.

Projects

Throughout the year teachers and their students work on projects that they present at the Sharing Event. These are often interdisciplinary, blending social studies, science, language arts, and mathematics naturally. Teachers and students communicate what they are doing and why, seek resources, and often collaborate via telecommunications. Issues of specific course content in the K– 12 schools and the university are addressed within such projects. Outcomes are often measured using authentic models and portfolio assessments. Motivation is usually intrinsic as learning is meaningful. Once someone does a project, everyone benefits by it. Everyone knows about it, can use it, and can build next steps with the "doers" of the project in the future phases of the learning system.

Sharing Event

All work for the year culminates in a Sharing Event – a non–competitive, celebration of learners, learning, giving, and achievements hosted on the campus of Long Island University.

Fourth graders make presentations in the morning at three 20 minutes sessions attended by 1/3 of three 4th grade classes and a smattering of others at each session. Community members (some active throughout the year and some new at the sharing event) present in the afternoon at three 20 minutes sessions attended by similarly constructed audiences. This structure builds small, intimate, cohort groups of no more than eight students and an adult teacher/leader and integrates them into an audience. Each cohort group joins a different two–thirds of the audience at each of the six sessions. This is a complex design but built to model creating communities within and between audiences and presenters.

Examples of the more than 100 past presentations include:

Fourth Grade Contributors

American Revolution on Long Island
Animals of Long Island Database
Culper Spy Ring During the American Revolution
Hypermedia Explorations of Local Communities Sites
Industry, Environment, & Famous Places of Long Island
Interviews of Long Island Political Figures
Long Island Stamp Album
School Life on Long Island in 1877
Senior Citizens Tell Their Stories
Timeline of Signs of Spring (Animals, Weather, Flora Observed)

Community Member Contributors

Cablevision/Nickelodeon
Environmental Center of Smithtown & the Setaukets
Lego Dacta
Marian Carll Farm

Members of the Shinnecock Nation
New York Islanders Organization Sportscaster
Newsday
Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities
Theodore Roosevelt Sanctuary
University Hospital (SUNY/Stony Brook)
Voice of America

We had an ethnographer participant who travelled from Albany to attend, a still photographer, and a video crew from a local high school audio–visual class. Each made contributions to our recordings of the event.

Looking on, one sees lots of little workshops bustling with interactive audiences. Student groups represent themselves, their class, and their district. They are responsible for learning throughout the day and reporting back to the rest of the class afterwards. All members of the audience write User Names of people they meet into their programs with the intent to continue conversation and learning after the day. Because *everyone* does not participate in *every* session, participants are charged with the responsibilities of telling what they experienced so others can experience it, too. Dialogue continues electronically as people share observations and seek to learn more.

In order to see us all as connected and also keep us small enough to be part of an active working group, one session at the event is attended by a single representative from each class. In 1993, the director of SPLIA, the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities, held a barn raising – building a twenty by twenty foot replica of a local historical structure. When all sessions were over and we convened in our large lecture hall, a choral ensemble from one of the high schools performed and representatives from each class were on the stage with their model barn. In 1994, each class sent a representative to a session held by a reporter from Voice of America. The Sharing Event was covered and translated into 40 languages and broadcast to 400 cities throughout the world. The student representatives had the opportunity to meet in a small, intimate setting to find out about Voice Of America and how our learning community would be shared with the world. They, then, shared what *they* learned with their teachers, classmates, and parents.

While energized within a festive and vibrant atmosphere, participants built new links in the creation of our learning community throughout the day in each of our Sharing Events – 1993 and 1994.

What Does It All Mean?

Perhaps, in part, because the Long Island Team is thus far an unfunded project and no one gets paid or pays to participate, people freely give to it and resources are plentiful. Contributions in services and the sharing of equipment (*e.g.*, from Newsday, Cablevision, Long Island University, the schools, the community) and the time, effort, and energy of its "giving" participants are extraordinary. At the moment, though, not every participant in our community functions beyond traditional school structures. Some use computers programs and access to telecommunications much as they would use a new textbook or piece of equipment. Nothing much changes; our activities are merely "exciting" new classroom projects. For other people, however, who are most growing within the community, there is a freedom and openness about their involvement. It is a very different model from what we routinely see around us. People *give* and learn, commit and connect, engage and do with energy and purpose.

We open thoughts about new paradigms – new ways to think about integrating what people do into collaborative activities within meaningful contexts. Our separate goals at the university and in participating schools, nature sanctuaries, libraries, museums, businesses, and industries are not only **compatible**; they are often powerfully **linked** as we see beyond our traditional work settings. We look toward the time when we will not ask, "What kinds of meaningful work can we do together?" but where the presence of meaningful work arises naturally from our shared goals and desires for community. We intuitively strive to see, create, and do them together. For this, it may be necessary to see beyond borders and do more time and place shifting.

We are all teachers in this system – guides, coaches, navigators. We are also learners – pilots, discoverers, adventurers. Young children as well as adults blend their teaching/learning roles as they guide, coach, navigate, and pilot to, from, and for one another, us, and others to learn deeply within and beyond our traditional school setting. As adults in this system, we re–examine the teachers/learners within ourselves, within our work and life settings. Boundaries and borders seem to blur as we reach out, often using powerful technologies, to create a shared vision of teaching/learning and community for purpose. We move ever–closer to living that vision. It is a forceful image that has energy and vision not contained within "projects" or "activities" alone. It is something else, much deeper, and growing into an active model for extending our learning communities to and with others.

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